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"A BRUTAL, INDECENT SPECTACLE": HETEROSEXUALITY, FUTURITY, AND *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN*

Mason Stokes

In an early book on James Baldwin, Stanley Macebuh notes that "heterosexual copulation in [*Go Tell It on the Mountain*], as in Baldwin's other novels, is described often as a brutal, indecent spectacle" (62). It is, Macebuh continues, "as though we are watching an ugly, distasteful show." And he's right. No later than the novel's second page, heterosexual sex is depicted as something indecent, something dirty. We're told that John Grimes and his brother Roy "had watched a man and woman in the basement of a condemned house. They did it standing up. The woman had wanted fifty cents, and the man had flashed a razor" (4). Even John and Roy's parents aren't immune from the taint of heterosexuality: "they did it too, and sometimes John heard them in the bedroom behind him, over the sound of rats' feet, and rat screams, and the music and cursing from the harlot's house downstairs" (5). Further, when Father James stages a kind of intervention in the Temple of the Fire Baptized, it's not traditional sexual deviants who are singled out but Elisha and Ella Mae, who had been "walking disorderly" together (9). In these early pages, heterosexuality may as well be the condemned house that John and Roy spy on, a space of rat screams and harlot curses.

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I begin with Macebuh because he usefully inverts the terms of sexual spectacle. Whereas it's usually homosexuality that is accused of the inappropriately spectacular—of flaunting and flamboyance, of rubbing itself in people's unsuspecting faces—here it's straight folks, with their unseemly copulations, who are making a spectacle of themselves. Of course Baldwin's representation of heterosexuality emerges from his representation of homosexuality, which, in *Go Tell It*, holds up John's love for Elisha as somehow purer, more loving, than the novel's often perverse heterosexual expressions. This distinction, Macebuh writes, "is so obviously absurd that we can only conclude that the author was here denoting a personal preference rather than making an objective comment on the merits of homosexuality" (62).

Baldwin no longer needs defending from such commentary. In the decades since Macebuh wrote, and with the growth of both queer studies and black queer studies, "the merits of homosexuality" have been amply unpacked, as have the far-reaching implications of Baldwin's "personal preference." Roderick A. Ferguson, for example, argues that *Go Tell It* "rearticulates the meaning of love, removing it from the romantic ideology of the heteropatriarchal household and the heterosexist church and placing it outside the framework of rational heteronormative regulation" (107). The result, Ferguson continues, is "to claim the nonheteronormative as the location for new and emergent identifications and social relations" (108). Far from being swayed by a mere personal preference, then, Baldwin is deliberately inverting both Christian and sexual theologies, making homosexuality the basis for a utopian reimagining of faith and love.

While I agree with Ferguson and others who have reclaimed same-sex love and desire from the puzzlement of critics like Macebuh, I actually take seriously Macebuh's initial observation: heterosexuality in *Go Tell It* is a mess. Queer readings of this and other of Baldwin's novels have paid off in rich and suggestive ways, affording ample attention to Baldwin's sometimes troubled and wayward queers.[1] But what about his heterosexuals, those poor lost souls burning with a desire that leads, it seems, only to rape and misery, death and loss? In the pages that follow, I argue that Baldwin's depiction of queer possibility depends on the spectacular failure of heterosexuality to ensure the future, a failure that ultimately severs heterosexuality from its procreative logics and justifications. In his essay "The Preservation of Innocence," published just four years before *Go Tell It*, Baldwin addresses "the oldest, the most insistent and the most vehement charge faced by the homosexual: that he is unnatural because he has turned from his life-giving function to a union which is sterile" (234–35). In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin reverses this critique, portraying heterosexuality as sterility itself, as a form of desire without a future.

Any analysis of sexuality in Baldwin's work must first wrestle with the question of terminology, of categories. "As reductive forms of intimacy," Guy Mark Foster argues, "homosexuality and heterosexuality are simply not relevant categories of desire in the Baldwinian representational landscape" (395). Foster's warning echoes Baldwin's own thoughts on the subject. As Baldwin said in a 1965 interview, "those terms, homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual are 20th-century terms which, for me, really have very little meaning. I've never myself, in watching myself and watching other people, watching life, been able to discern exactly where the barriers were" ("Race" 54). Baldwin's disdain for sexual labels has an analogue in his suspicion of racial categories. As he puts it in the film *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*, "As long as you think you're white, there's no hope for you."[2]

It's possible to admire such sentiments without being held hostage by them—to take Baldwin's point about definitional slippage and uncertainty without losing sight of the fact that discourses of power circulate in very real ways. In other words, Foster's point about "reductive forms of intimacy" is well taken, but we need to remember that heterosexuality and homosexuality are not solely forms of intimacy but also forms of power. Though the words heterosexual and homosexual appear nowhere in *Go Tell It*, the regimes they name exercise enormous influence. Heterosexuality, for example, circulates in the novel as a series of assumptions about the future and who will create it. As Florence says about John when he is only an infant, "when he get big enough to *really* go after the ladies you going to have your hands full, girl" (211). And Gabriel experiences and understands his heterosexual desire as both curse and possibility, as a thing against which he must struggle and as the engine of the procreative future he longs for. Meanwhile, the desire that John feels for Elisha is no less real for being unnamed, nor is it simply a fluid, free-ranging, and uncategorizable desire that John can have easy and untroubled access to. In short, Gabriel Grimes, patriarch and menacing stand-in for God the Father, figures a heterosexuality that terrorizes his stepson John, who is struggling to imagine a future outside of the familial and procreative logics of heterosexuality.

In making Gabriel the public face of heterosexuality, I'm aware of Ferguson's argument that heteronormativity was an almost exclusively white franchise. As he writes, quoting Chandan C. Reddy's "Home, Houses, Nonidentity: *Paris Is Burning*," "The heteronormative household was practically a 'material impossibility' for people of color as the U.S. 'family wage' in the early twentieth century defined the American home as white, heterosexual, and American, and thereby excluded people of color on the grounds that they were incapable of, or uninterested in, constituting heteronormative families and adopt-

ing their regulatory demands" (104). In this sense, then, it would be impossible for Gabriel either to claim or to exercise the privilege of heterosexuality, given his already abject state as a black man, a too-ready signifier of pathologized sexual excess.

It's worth pausing, however, to remember that there's a prehistory to heteronormativity, one in which heterosexuality was anything but normalized. Baldwin writes less than twenty years after *Funk and Wagnall's New Standard Dictionary of the English Language* defined heterosexuality as a "depraved feeling toward the opposite sex." And only thirteen years before this, "heterosexuality" made its first appearance in *Webster's New International Dictionary* as a "morbid sexual passion for one of the opposite sex." These definitions emerged from late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century medical discourses, which were trying to account for a newly unleashed pleasure system, one unconstrained by procreative imperatives, and thus pathological. The 1901 edition of *Dorland's Medical Dictionary*, for example, defined heterosexuality as "abnormal or perverted appetite toward the opposite sex" (qtd. in Katz 86).

And yet in 1934, between *Webster*'s and *Funk and Wagnall*'s definitions of heterosexuality as a problem, *Webster's* changed course and began calling heterosexuality a "manifestation of sexual passion for one of the opposite sex; normal sexuality." This rather fluid back-and-forth between the normal and the abnormal reminds us, of course, that etymology never tells a clean story, that concepts and paradigms are always in flux, carrying the past while creating the future. But this history is useful in understanding Baldwin's treatment of a specifically heterosexual problem. Baldwin isn't simply charting the problem of desire, be it heterosexual or homosexual; rather, he's interested in a particularly heterosexual manifestation of that problem, one that carries the taint of pathology visible in those early definitions.

Baldwin understands that heterosexuality was a particular problem because it had more to lose: the procreative context and purpose of marriage. For while both Christian and sexual theologies of Baldwin's day would have considered unfettered desire a problem in and of itself, whether hetero or homo, the reproductive burden that heterosexuality bears makes desire—with all of its wayward urges—a more pressing problem than it would be for homosexuality. In order to escape its pathological beginnings, heterosexuality draws on the procreative logics that homosexuality lacks, and it's these logics that anchor that normality first signaled by *Webster's* in 1923.

This normality was never stable, however, particularly for African Americans, which returns us to Ferguson's argument that heteronormativity was an almost exclusively white franchise. Ferguson

writes, "As figures of nonheteronormative perversions, straight African Americans were reproductive rather than *productive*, heterosexual but never *heteronormative*" (87). A part of what I want to call into question here, however, is this association of a nonheteronormative heterosexuality with reproduction, an association that Baldwin's novel unsettles. Gabriel is torn between competing drives: his desire to ensure the Grimes line and desire itself. Ironically, the latter troubles the former, as the excess of sexual desire threatens to overrun the marital and procreative logics that make the heterosexual heteronormative. In short, Gabriel models heterosexuality as both desire and procreative engine, highlighting the ways in which heterosexuality contains within itself the seeds of its own undoing.

The Grimes family tree (fig. 1) tells this story as a gestalt, as a series of heterosexual hopes and dreams ending in absence and failure. Descending from Rachel, a freed slave woman, Gabriel and Florence carve out two different paths, but what's immediately apparent from this illustration is the genealogical imbalance. The procreative energy is all on Gabriel's side of the family, making visible what Ferguson calls Florence's rejection of "the regulatory regimes of the heteropatriarchal household" (106). Baldwin describes Florence as "beautiful," though she "did not look with favor on any of the black men who lusted after her, not wishing to exchange her mother's cabin for one of theirs and to raise their children and so go down, toil-blasted, into as it were a common grave" (79–80). Though Florence later wavers in her rejection of heterosexual domesticity, meeting and falling in love with Frank, she considers this slippage "her great mistake" (91), and when Frank dies in World War I, Florence feels only "an exhausted exasperation and a vast relief" (90).[3] With Frank's death in Europe, this side of the family comes to an end, and Florence is dying in the novel's present, presumably of cancer.

The story of Gabriel's side of the family is, as the family tree makes clear, more complicated. His two solid lines document his commitment to continuing "the line of the faithful, a royal line" (123–24), while the dotted line that connects him to Esther signals a heterosexual desire that works against Gabriel's hope for a legitimate heir. Because his first wife Deborah "was not like the mincing daughters of Zion . . . their married bed would be holy" (123). Gabriel finds in Deborah none of those qualities that had sent him wandering in search of harlots, and he decides to follow Paul's advice: "It is better to marry than to burn" (124).[4] This wisdom neatly sums up the deeply ironic situation of heterosexual desire in Baldwin's novel. The desire that gives heterosexuality its shape and impulse is squelched by the sanctity of marriage and the holiness of the marriage bed. Gabriel "hated the evil that lived in his body, and he feared it, as he

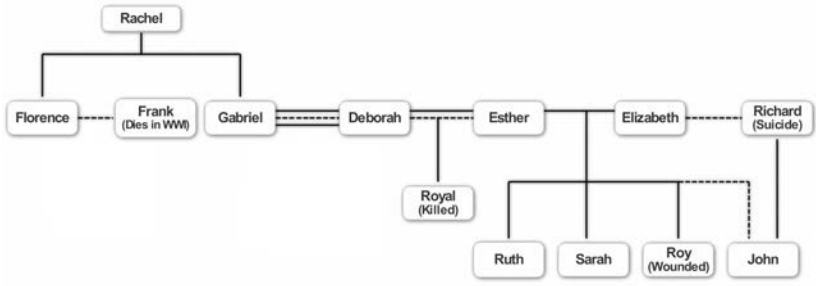

Figure 1. The Grimes Family

feared and hated the lions of lust and longing that prowled the defenseless city of his mind" (104). What Gabriel hates, in other words, is a desire that not only defines heterosexuality but also keeps it from being normalized, and it's only in marriage to Deborah that he can escape it. Deborah calls forth not Gabriel's desire but his pity, given her rape at the hands of a group of white men and the tainted position she occupies in the black community as a result. Though this pity forms the basis of their marriage, "the joyless groaning of their marriage bed" (135) isn't enough to produce the heir Gabriel seeks. As the family tree makes clear, their union results in nothing but empty space.

With Esther, Gabriel rediscovers those "lions of lust and longing" in an extramarital relationship that, in ironic contrast to his sterile marriage with Deborah, does bear fruit. It would be "in the womb of Esther, who was no better than a harlot, that the seed of the prophet would be nourished" (148). But Royal, the heir who emerges, is illegitimate, unclaimed, and destined to die on the streets of Chicago, constituting yet another end of the line. With his marriage to Elizabeth, Gabriel pushes the reset button, taking on, as with Deborah, a fallen woman whom he pities but doesn't desire. With Elizabeth comes John, the illegitimate son of Elizabeth and Richard. That Richard's story ends in suicide makes Richard the third man in the family tree to die violently.

Gabriel and Elizabeth's portion of the family tree is certainly busier than the other sections, but the result is no more encouraging. Their firstborn is Roy, who lies wounded in a knife fight in the novel's present, his "new trouble . . . the beginning of the fulfillment of a prophesy" (41). Sarah and Ruth are mere ciphers in relation to Gabriel's dreams of an exalted future and Baldwin's plotting of the Grimes family's fate. And then there's John, Gabriel's son through the paternity of another man. With Frank, Royal, and Richard dead and Roy already a lost cause, John, the young man who longs for

Elisha's touch, bears the hopes for the family's procreative future. In other words, the only lines that matter in the Grimes family tree end either in death or homosexuality. Not only has heterosexuality been "an ugly, distasteful show" but it also has been a failure. As Florence taunts her brother, "Where *is* your life, Gabriel. . . ? Where *is* it? Ain't it all done gone for nothing? Where's your branches? Where's your fruit?" (252). Gabriel's hopes for "the seed of the prophet" have led only to dead ends.

This figuration of the future through semen marks a larger concern with seed in the novel, that precious fluid that either ensures the future or, though its spillage, forecloses it. During his time with harlots, Gabriel had "spent his holy seed in a forbidden darkness where it could only die" (105), and, as we've seen, that same seed ripens, unpromisingly, "in the womb of Esther, who was no better than a harlot" (148). This fixation becomes most visible in the two dreams Gabriel has when he's praying for God's guidance as to whether he should marry Deborah. In the first dream, Gabriel revisits his time of drunkenness and debauchery, fighting both Satan and prostitutes. When he awakes, "his loins were covered with his own white seed" (126). As he cleans himself up, his thoughts turn to Onan, "who had scattered his seed on the ground rather than continue his brother's line." Ironically, this moment connects Gabriel with John, whose masturbation, while thinking of the boys at school, marks the novel's first invocation of onanism: "he had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive" (12–13). As a homosexual, John is unable to "continue his brother's [Roy's] line," the only line that would matter for Gabriel, who, as a spiller of seed, finds himself in the same onanistic situation. The second dream is a dream of transcendence, of escape from the earthly and bodily desires of the first. In it, Gabriel climbs higher and higher, lured by the voice of God, eventually finding himself in a peaceful valley. He looks back down the mountain as "the elect" come toward him, singing, in white robes. "Touch them not," the Lord says, for "'my seal is on them.' And Gabriel turned and fell on his face, and the voice said again: 'So shall thy seed be'" (127). This dream dialogue echoes the dialogue between God and Abraham in Genesis 15, in which Abraham complains that, because he lacks a true heir, a servant in his household will inherit his estate. God responds, "Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be" (Gen. 15.5). Whereas in Genesis the heavens become the visible sign of Abraham's infinite posterity, in Baldwin's novel we see a confusing juxtaposition of the Lord's command not to touch the elect with his promise to Gabriel that his seed shall be on them. In this second dream, then, Gabriel's unconscious writes a way out of the problem

of heterosexuality, the problem of unholy desire. Gabriel is not to touch the elect, but he is promised the procreative future he longs for, a kind of immaculate conception. God offers the future without the burning of desire.

For Gabriel, however, God's promise can only be ironic, since it's Deborah who is elected, and whose sterility makes a cruel joke of God's promise and Gabriel's faith. Though Gabriel's second dream promises him the heir he seeks, the result is no different from the first dream, where his white seed was wasted on his own loins, or John's masturbatory fantasy about his fellow schoolboys. In all three cases, Onan's crime is repeated, a future denied.

An image near the end of the novel tells this story all too well. As the saints leave the Temple of the Fire Baptized, they see the overnight storm's effect on the streets of Harlem: "The water ran in the gutters with a small, discontented sound; on the water traveled paper, burnt matches, sodden cigarette-ends; gobs of spittle, green-yellow, brown, and pearly; the leavings of a dog, the vomit of a drunken man, the dead sperm, trapped in rubber, of one abandoned to his lust" (256). It's hard to imagine a more inglorious end for the seed of the prophet, now no more procreative than the pearly gobs of spittle that swim with it in the gutter. But the image that immediately follows is one of purification: "All moved slowly to the black grating where down it rushed, to be carried to the river, which would hurl it into the sea." This image sets up the new world coming, with John as its prophet. It marks the shift from procreative heterosexuality to a different kind of futurity.

I'll take up John's emergence as prophet later; for now, however, I want to address the question of causality, of sources. In my treatment of Gabriel as the figure for a problematic heterosexuality, I've risked locating that problem in the individual body, in the physiological experience of sexual desire. The novel, however, requires us to place this desire in context, to understand the Grimes family's failures to ensure its future as embedded in a specifically American history of blood and violence. This becomes clear in the novel in two ways.

The first involves the story of Gabriel and Florence's mother, Rachel, the freed slave woman who sits atop the Grimes family tree. Gabriel and Florence, we learn, were not her first children: "On this plantation she had grown up as one of the field workers, for she was very tall and strong; and by and by she had married and raised children, all of whom had been taken from her, one by sickness and two by auction; and one, whom she had not been allowed to call her own, had been raised in the master's house" (74). This small detail of lost children tells, of course, a much larger story: the story of slavery and its aftermaths. Families torn apart, failures of generation, chil-

dren called by the name of their masters—these are the products of a system that both attacked and failed to recognize as legitimate the African American family. As Frederick Douglass writes in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, "Slavery does away with fathers, as it does away with families. Slavery has no use for either fathers or families, and its laws do not recognize their existence in the social arrangements of the plantation" (51). The novel's present is only two generations removed from slavery, a reminder of the ways in which slavery still exerts control over the Grimes family.

The second way in which Gabriel's problem is revealed to be more structural than personal returns us to the issue of seed. After his affair with Esther, Gabriel is so sickened by his sin that he flees, seeking escape in strange pulpits and communities. What he finds, of course, is that he can't outrun his sin, but he also gains a deeper experience of the sufferings of his people, sufferings that both signal "how far his people had wandered from God" (158) and result from the killing logics of American racism. As Baldwin writes,

> And blood, in all the cities through which he passed, ran down. There seemed no door, anywhere, behind which blood did not call out, unceasingly, for blood; no woman . . . who had not seen her father, her brother, her lover, or her son cut down without mercy; who had not seen her sister become part of the white man's great whorehouse . . . no man whose manhood had not been, at the root, sickened, whose loins had not been dishonored, whose seed had not been scattered into oblivion and worse than oblivion, into living shame and rage, and into endless battle. (158–59)

The kind of racial violence that Gabriel witnesses was, as this passage makes clear, an assault on family, on the very concept of relation. Fathers, brothers, lovers, sons—these are the victims, and the result is a scattering of seed into oblivion or worse. By returning to the language of lost seed, Baldwin reminds us that no mere onanistic seepage can rival that which is lost through generations of racial violence.

Even those dead ends on the Grimes family tree carry the association with American racism. Frank dies in Europe for a country that denied him the most basic of civil rights; Richard commits suicide when he comes to realize his true place in the so-called justice system; Royal "got hisself killed in Chicago" (171), presumably the result of the kind of urban conflict that results from systemic segregation; and Roy lies wounded from an encounter with white boys. There's a way in which all these deaths—not merely Roy's—are the fulfillment of

prophesy, the all-too-predictable endings of black bodies in America.

These failures of procreativity help us to understand the double bind of heterosexual desire. To the extent that Gabriel can bend that desire toward normativity, it's through the twin engines of marriage and procreation, forces that could shift the energy from desire to reproduction, from sexual pleasure to sexual creation. For Gabriel, however, this shift offers no redemption. As a black man, his excess desire epitomizes heterosexuality as a problem. With the normalization of heterosexuality, however, Gabriel is still an outsider, his heterosexual procreativity short-circuited by racial violence. In neither case is Gabriel, as a figure for black heterosexuality, anything but a failure, and his failure begins to look like something much larger: the failure of a black future.

This question of a failed future can be usefully routed through Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Like José Esteban Muñoz and others, I find Edelman's antirelational project dependent on a too-narrow conception of the queer subject, one that assumes the future to be not a privilege but a fact. For in Baldwin's novel we see the future's utter contingency, its pull toward not-being. Here, then, I want to bend the chronology and allow Baldwin to speak back to Edelman, to give him a chance to intervene in a conversation he preceded—and perhaps anticipated—by over fifty years.

For Edelman, the range of political possibilities is radically circumscribed by a "reproductive futurism," a fetish of the Child as an inarguable value (3). "That Child remains," Edelman writes, "the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention." The only way out of this stacked deck, Edelman argues, is for queerness to name "the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children,' the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism." This place outside is "the place of the social order's death drive." For Edelman, "the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (9).

As others have pointed out, Edelman's figure of the Child erases particularity through consolidation. As Muñoz argues, "In the same way all queers are not the stealth-universal-white-gay man invoked in queer antirelational formulations, all children are not the privileged white babies to whom contemporary society caters" (94). Muñoz continues, "Theories of queer temporality that fail to factor in the relational relevance of race or class merely reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject."

For Baldwin, Gabriel's longing for an heir—for a reproductive futurity—can't be written off as mere narcissistic desire or even as an

appeal to a universalizing liberal politics. For the Grimes family, the future is too fragile, too uncertain, to be taken for granted. The deaths of Frank, Richard, and Royal, and the knife wound that prophetically marks Roy, all signal the negation of a black future that is a far cry from the queer jouissance that Edelman extols. Rather, it marks the limits of African American subjectivity, the short-circuiting of the black family. What Baldwin makes clear is that queer resistance to reproductive futurism only makes sense if there's a future to surrender. Baldwin, for whom race, sexuality, and violence are imbricated at the level of both body and family, knows that his characters can't afford to be so dismissive of a future that's tenuous at best. In the same sense, Edelman's death drive becomes much less interesting when one's self-destruction is already being plotted by others.

Baldwin, therefore, charts a course quite different from Edelman's, reversing the location of futurity. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, it's heterosexuality that lacks a future and queerness that becomes the future's last, best hope. John Grimes, as a figure for the artist as a young man, becomes that hope not in spite of his abjection from a specifically reproductive futurity but because of it. Gabriel's investment in the "seed of the prophet" actually bears fruit in a new kind of prophecy, though one disarticulated from the heterosexual and the patrilineal.

John, freed from the reproductive imperatives of heterosexuality, must imagine a different kind of future, one that will require words yet to be spoken, a different frame of reference. As he approaches his father's house in the novel's final pages, he is afraid: "he wanted to stop and turn to Elisha, and tell him . . . something for which he found no words" (260). He stares at Elisha, struggling to say "all that could never be said" (261). This struggle for language is, of course, the struggle of the artist, and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is its result. Here we see the blurring of author and protagonist in this closely autobiographical novel. As a child, John had been singled out by a teacher, "told to keep up the good work" (15). This recognition gave him

> if not a weapon at least a shield; he apprehended totally, without belief or understanding, that he had in himself a power that other people lacked; that he could use this to save himself, to raise himself. . . . His father's arm, rising and falling, might make him cry, and that voice might cause him to tremble; yet his father could never be entirely the victor, for John cherished something that his father could not reach. It was his hatred and his intelligence that he cherished, the one feeding the other. (15)

John wants, we later learn, "to give his hatred words one day" (169), and it's at the intersection of this desire and his wordless desire for Elisha that his future, and thus Baldwin's future, is both born and guaranteed. This is a queer future of language, of revelation, of art, and it's one that will endure long after the novel's abortive couplings. And though it's born in hatred, it's anything but a negation. Rather, it's the paradoxical joining of a wish for the death of the father with the queer hope of a new kind of relation, a new kind of love. Only with the death of the father can John find the open road he needs, and that death begins—at least figuratively—with the "holy kiss" (262) that Elisha places on John's forehead at novel's end. Gabriel, no longer relevant to John's life and no longer an obstacle to it, is a mute witness to this scene, standing just above and behind John, unsmiling.

Of course, the other witness here is John's mother, who "stood in the doorway, in the long shadows of the hall" (263). And it's easy—perhaps too easy—to forget her amid the father-son drama that occupies the novel's and the reader's attention. Elizabeth's role here remains quiet, opaque, and even when she smiles at John, just before Elisha's kiss, "her smile remained unreadable; he could not tell what it hid" (262). By way of conclusion I want to take seriously Elizabeth's unreadable smile, and the complicity with John I believe it represents. Elizabeth's quiet presence at the novel's end allows us one last look at the novel's depiction of heterosexuality, not through the patrilineal logic of seed but through a matrilineal lens of pregnancy and childbirth. For just as John cannot tell what his mother's smile hides, there's something else she's been hiding from him throughout the novel, hiding it so well, in fact, that it's almost completely hidden from the reader as well: Elizabeth is pregnant.

We learn this in the novel's third paragraph, where John meditates on the previous disappearances of his mother, disappearances that always involved the sudden appearance of a new sibling. These disappearances horrified John: "he remembered only enough to be afraid every time her belly began to swell" (4). Roy knows that such a time is coming again: "She would soon be going away again, Roy said—he knew much more about such things than John. John had observed his mother closely, seeing no swelling yet, but his father had prayed one morning for the 'little voyager soon to be among them,' and so John knew that Roy spoke the truth." What's striking about this early disclosure of Elizabeth's pregnancy is that this is the first and only mention of it in the novel—in a novel obsessed with reproduction, with procreative futurity. Even when Florence taunts Gabriel about his lack of fruit and branches, Gabriel doesn't use the fact of Elizabeth's pregnancy as a retort. This striking silence helps

to explain, I think, why readers and critics of the novel easily miss this detail. In fact, one could argue that I've missed it, that I've withheld an awareness of Elizabeth's pregnancy so that I could make my argument about the utter failure of heterosexual futurity in the novel, an argument troubled, perhaps, by this "little voyager" waiting in the wings.

I would argue, however, that the barely open secret of Elizabeth's pregnancy is congruent with my reading of heterosexual failure, for the novel has done nothing to make us believe in that pregnancy as a symbol of a new and hopeful future. Rather, the novel's litany of death and procreative failure, sexual excess, and onanistic waste makes it impossible to read the baby-to-be as anything other than a cruel and ironic jab at Gabriel, a reminder that he's stuck in the changing same, the repetition of hope, followed always by failure. That Elizabeth's pregnancy could disappear so completely in this novel signals its inadequacy, its inability to figure the futurity that pregnancy was built to figure. In any other novel, the announcement of a pregnancy in the third paragraph would imply hope and possibility—would become, in fact, the novel's main focus—but not here, not in a novel that so convincingly demonstrates the failure of reproductive, and thus heterosexual, hope.

And so we return instead to John and to his mother's opaque smile, which I read as her acknowledgement of the future that awaits him. His is a future cut off from and utterly unlike the life his father lived and the future his father imagined. But it might just be the future his mother imagines for him, a future in which he will be forced to discover new relations of love and desire, new ways of being. As we learn much earlier in the novel, John "had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father's father. He would have another life" (13).

None of this will be easy. It never is in Baldwin's world. Whether it's the cup of God's wrath that hovers over Sonny at the end of "Sonny's Blues" or the torn bits of the letter announcing Giovanni's execution that blow back on David at the end of *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin's characters struggle, and ultimately fail, to escape their pasts. They're suspended, it seems, in a moment when change is possible but never guaranteed. John Grimes knows this. As he says to Elisha in the novel's last pages, "no matter what happens to me, where I go, what folks say about me, no matter what *any*body says, you remember—please remember—I was saved. I was *there*" (262). Whatever fate awaits the little voyager Elizabeth carries, it is John who experiences a new birth and Elisha and his mother who serve as his witnesses.

Notes

1. Dwight A. McBride's work is particularly important. See, for example, *James Baldwin Now* and "Straight Black Studies." *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* have received the most critical attention. For the former, see Crawford, Robinson, and Waitinas; for the latter, see Armengol and Henderson.

2. A particularly arch example of Baldwin's disdain for sexual labels comes in the much later novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, where Baldwin's alter ego, Leo Proudhammer, senses that two male drama students are "on the make" for him—"not that either of them was 'gay'—to use the incomprehensible vernacular" (451). Interestingly, other sexual vernaculars do show up in Baldwin's fiction but only as terms of abuse such as queer, fairy, fagot, and faggot. Baldwin differentiates, then, between sexual labels as self-identification, which he finds meaningless, and those labels hurled by others, which were simply a part his world and the world of his characters.

3. Here I partially disagree with Ferguson, who argues that the novel ultimately "repositions Florence within a quest for heteropatriarchal domesticity" without recognizing Florence's later disavowal of that quest (109).

4. Paul advises, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband. . . . I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn" (1 Cor. 7.1–9).

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